

Diving to 220 feet

I've always been very comfortable in the water and scuba diving is one of my all-time favorite things to do. Sure, I can hold my breath and dive down to take a look around, but nothing beats being able to breathe underwater in a world so alien and beautiful. I love to find a spot about twenty feet down, next to a reef with colorful fish darting about, and just watch the action unfold. Eventually, the animals get used to you being there and you can observe them going about their business. There are colorful little clown fish that survive by hiding within the poisonous tentacles of anemones, sea fans gently swaying back-and-forth, and all sorts of strange and unusual creatures of every size and shape.

And then there's the constant reminder of your breathing. The regulator in your mouth makes a strange hissing sound when you breathe in, and the bubbles ascend to the surface with each exhale. I've read that the voice of Darth Vader uses a variation of that breathing sound for his voice, and I can believe it.

I've been extremely fortunate to have had the opportunity to dive on many interesting reefs and wrecks in various parts of the world. One of them, Vanuatu, is a tiny country in the South Pacific that has some great scuba diving sites due to all the World War II hardware that ended up under water. In one place called "Million Dollar Point", literally hundreds of vehicles, artillery, and other equipment that weren't worth bringing back to the U.S. got dumped into the ocean. The story is that the French military living on the island thought the Americans would eventually just leave all the stuff for them, and refused to pay a small salvage fee. Wanting to have the last word about the matter, the US Army just drove everything into the water and left town. The result is an impressive mass of twisted steel and coral encrusted tires that's created its own reef formation over the past 75 years.

The other great dive very close to that same spot is off the island of Santo, where the SS Coolidge sank in 1942 after hitting a "friendly" (otherwise known as "ours") mine. All but two of the five thousand GI's escaped safely from the sinking ship before the Coolidge settled to the bottom on her port side with the bow in about 60 feet of water and the stern around the 220 foot mark. At almost 650 feet long this is one of the largest, easily accessed, wrecks in the world. "Easily accessed" being a relative term, of course. The good thing about being so deep is that coral doesn't grow that far down, so the wreck is in remarkably good shape for its age. This is one of those dives where you definitely want to have an experienced guide along to show you around. There were times when we were so far back inside the ship that there was no way you could have found your way out by yourself. The thought did cross my mind about what would happen if the guide had a heart attack. You go in small groups of four or five divers, through tiny passageways and spaces so small your tank would sometimes get caught, and you'd have to back up and squeeze through another way. Because we were deep and inside the ship, you really needed

your underwater flashlight to see anything. The darkness, the depth, the utter silence, except for the sound of your regulator, added to the bizarre feeling of being in a place where the ceiling was to your left and the floor to your right. All this led to a condition of heightened awareness; a feeling that you had to pay attention or pay serious consequences.

It didn't help to hear stories about the two guys they found down there who got lost in the silt and didn't find their way out before their air ran out. I noticed myself keeping a short leash on my guide and at least one eye on his spare regulator, should something go wrong with both of mine. There are dozens of different dives that can be made on the ship without seeing the same thing twice, but one of the "must do's" is to see the Lady of the Coolidge. Because the ship was originally a fancy cruise liner in the 1930's before being pressed into service for the war, many strange dichotomies exist. In one huge open ballroom, sophisticated chandeliers now hang limp on the wall, and in the middle of the floor where tails and petticoats used to Waltz, lies a long row of about forty white porcelain toilets bolted together, inches apart, "GI style", side by side and back to back. And built into the wall, above and to the right of the false fireplace, stands the sculpture of the regal Victorian Lady of the Coolidge. She gets kissed by divers from all over the world, despite her proper morals.

One of the negatives to deep dives is that because of the possibility of getting too much nitrogen into your blood, you have to limit your time on the bottom, and use some of your air on the way up to "decompress". Having never done this before, I wasn't quite sure what you did during the fifteen to twenty minutes you hang out at the thirty foot mark. Luckily for us, entertainment was provided free of charge by "Boris", a six foot long, five hundred pound grouper who seemed to enjoy visiting the divers. Boris is so famous that he's made it onto one of Vanuatu's postage stamps. I loved to watch this beast of the sea, and his entourage of smaller fish. Boris would come right up to your face and look at you with his big, bloodshot, algae covered eyes, open his monster mouth, and then just when you thought he was going to swallow you whole, here comes a little fish right between his lips to do some teeth cleaning. When he felt sufficiently scrubbed, Boris would spit the tiny fish out—saved for another day.

One of the things that people do while waiting for the nitrogen to purge from their blood, is to blow the underwater equivalent of a smoke ring. The idea is that you point your mouth towards the surface, part your lips, stick out your tongue and try to blow a circle of air out of your mouth. If done properly, a bubble in the shape of a ring escapes and gets larger and larger as it leaves your body. It looks really cool, and it's a lot more difficult to do than you would think.

I was lying on my back on the seafloor one day practicing this, when I accidentally dropped my regulator. I was immediately engulfed in a cold-sweat panic because I had just exhaled a lot of air. I knew my regulator was attached to a hose

somewhere, plus I knew I had an extra regulator on me, but at that moment I was stricken with fear. I quickly pushed off the ground and started feeling around for one of the four hoses emanating from my scuba tank behind my head. I found it within seconds, but it felt like an eternity with my lungs seeming as if they would burst. Even today, if I am asked about one of the scariest things that I've ever experienced, this is what comes to mind.

My last dive on the Coolidge was to swim the whole length of the ship to the stern at 220 feet and return along the deck. To put this in perspective, most recreational divers consider 100 feet to be about as far as they would want to go. This trip is a pretty big deal, and the guides check you out on several dives beforehand in order to observe your air consumption and see how you handle the pressure, so to speak. One of the fears of deep dives is nitrogen narcosis, being "narked", where you can lose sense of what we normally refer to as reality, and do stupid things. (Not that going that deep is particularly smart to begin with!) They told me a story of one guy who decided he had seen enough at the back of the ship, took off all his gear and bolted to the surface. He died. Other people have been known to enjoy the feeling so much they keep going deeper and deeper, never to be seen again. I can say for myself that the feeling at that depth is other-worldly, as if time takes on a new dimension, vision seems to be composed of movie pictures put together one after the other, but never quite fast enough. I wanted so bad to be in control of myself, but at the same time fascinated by its escape from my grasp. It seemed like a dream, but my depth gauge is still pegged at its limit of 200 feet, so I know I did it.

